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WORKING DOCUMENT ON INCLUSIVE, DYNAMIC AND RESULT ORIENTED COLLABORATION AND NETWORKING WITHIN THE MAB PROGRAMME AND THE WNBR

A. Introduction

1. International cooperation is at the heart of UNESCO mandate; so does the MAB programme.

2. International, regional, sub-regional and ecosystem-specific network-building has always been a key feature of the Man And the Biosphere (MAB) Programme aiming at better developing the scientific and technical capacities of countries, at facilitating knowledge-sharing, at creating synergies between research teams, at making the best use of limited human and financial resources and at fostering cooperation among local communities and other relevant stakeholders leaving in, within or having interactions with biosphere reserves.

3. Strengthening coordination, communication and cooperation within the framework of the World Network of Biosphere reserves (WNBR) and with other relevant stakeholders to allow for synergies and interdisciplinary collaboration has been identified among the most important specific priority for the future by contributors of the evaluation of Madrid Action Plan (MAP). There is a need to improve MAB networking structure and content.

4. The MAB Programme strategy (2015-2025) adopted by the 38th session of the General Conference of UNESCO explicitly describes its links with global development agenda 2030 and its SDGs and related targets, in particular through the global dissemination of the models of sustainability developed in biosphere reserves.

1 URL: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002280/228056e.pdf
5. The vision statement of the MAB strategy referring to “thriving societies leaving in harmony with biosphere” will be achieved by people collective action. Strategic Action Areas (C) specifically underlines the critical need for an “Inclusive, dynamic and result oriented collaboration and networking within the MAB programme and the WNBR” and its importance for MAB contribution to the global development agenda.

6. Based on current status of regional and thematic networks, on lessons learned and MAB programme framework for the next ten years, this working paper identifies some challenges facing collaboration and networking within MAB and suggests potential ways for addressing them in the near future.

B. Some facts and findings on collaboration and networking within the MAB programme and its related networks

7. The World network of biosphere reserves is the backbone of the intergovernmental MAB programme. It is a unique network of UN designated sites dedicated to sustainable development. It is the MAB program platform for exchanges and cooperation at global level.

8. World congress of biosphere reserves registered an increase number of participants. There are extraordinary events which strengthen collaboration and networking opportunities. They build the sense of MAB community.

9. To date, the WNBR comprises of 651 sites in 120 countries totalling 1,026,241,737 ha distributed as follows: 8% of Dryland; 12% Mangroves; 16% Tropical Forest; 32% Marine, Coastal & Island ecosystems; 10% Savannah and 59% Mountain ecosystems. The total human population is estimated at almost 171,174,300 inhabitants.

10. Regional and sub-regional networks² have a key role to play in the exchange of information, expertise and experience at regional level and to address specific regional issues. For instance, the African network of biosphere reserve (AfriMAB) with the support of the MAB Secretariat, is currently working on establishing a regional trust fund in order to overcome the persistent shortage of resources to fulfill the development and logistic functions of biosphere reserves.

11. Ecosystem and theme-specific networks³ include international cross country and cross regions research, capacity building and educational collaborations. For instance, the ten years long SUMAMAD project on marginalized drylands which ended in 2014 involved biosphere reserves from the various regions of the world.

² AfriMAB (Africa); ArabMAB (Arab states) EABRN (East Asia); EuroMAB (Europe and North America); Ibero MAB (Iberoamerican); PacMAB (Pacific); REDBIOS (East Atlantic); SACAM (South and Central Asia); SeaBRnet (Southeast Asia).
³ Mountains; Island and Coastal Biosphere Reserves; Tropical forests; Drylands; Urban areas; Savannas and Agro-ecosystems.
12. There are nine regional networks and seven thematic networks registered in MAB website where the MAB Secretariat has been playing a major role (coordination, facilitation, monitoring or implementation of project activities). The MAP evaluation has revealed that regional networks are far more institutionalized than thematic networks.

13. WNBR has experienced an average annual growth rate of roughly 3.7% between 1995 and 2013 (evaluation of MAP). For the past eight years (2008-2015), the WNBR expanded in all regions with a total increase of 123 sites worldwide. Fourteen new countries, almost developing countries, joined the WNBR: EuroMAB (Europe and North America) is the largest network. With six sites in Europe and one site in Latin America, the number of transboundary biosphere reserves has almost doubled and has proven their relevance to build peace and improve cooperation between neighbouring countries.

14. Within the regions, there are still some geographical gaps in terms of biosphere reserve representation; for instance in Southern Africa (Angola/Zambia/Namibia/Botswana); in Asia-Pacific (Nepal/New-Zealand/ Papua New Guinea/ Pacific Islands); Middle East (Saudi Arabia/Oman/Iraq); Europe (Norway & Iceland).

15. Except urban areas and agro ecosystems, registered thematic network on the MAB website are limited to ecosystem specific matters when a number of topics has been discussed within the MAB programme for the last two years involving diverse groups of participants.

16. A clearing house mechanism servicing the WNBR is a key element in support of networking and collaboration. This role has been devoted to the MAB Secretariat in the Madrid Action Plan but it has not been very successful in carrying out this function, due to shortage of human and financial resources. Web sites and publications do not provide an up to date state of the art knowledge repository with knowledge products for specific audiences (evaluation of MAP).

17. MAB national committees are the coordinating body of MAB activities at national level. They have a major role to play as facilitator of exchanges, knowledge-sharing, capacity building and training in country and outside the country. Their membership is variable.

18. The MAB is associated with key international processes, assisting in UNESCO’s overall contributions to major environmental conventions, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the Future Earth initiative.

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4 Africa: 12; Arab Region: 5; Asia & Pacific: 39; Europe & North America: 46; Latin America & Caribbean: 21.
6 biosphere reserve (BR) governance, transboundary biosphere reserves (TBR), communication and exchange of best practices, education for sustainable development (ESD), responsible consumption, green economies, branding, alternative energy, ecosystem services, sustainability science, sustainable funding, adaptation and mitigation of the effects of climate change, biodiversity and climate change, zonation, commercialization and integrated monitoring, future of botanists
MAB should build strategic collaboration with other UNESCO networks to mutualize expertise available within other sectors. For instance, as of February 2016, there are 680 UNESCO Chairs (https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/list-unesco-chairs-25-02-2016.pdf) and 49 UNITWIN networks (https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/list-unesco-networks-25-02-2016.pdf) related to a wide range of disciplines (science, economics, history, literature...).

C. Suggestion on way forward

19. Despite very positive trend, there is still a need to improve the geographical representation and to foster exchanges within the WNBR both at global and regional level. Inclusiveness should promote transnational and transregional collaboration and networking. At international level, South-South and North-South-South triangular cooperation, will be fostered as catalyst for dialogue and co-production of scientific knowledge, in synergy with local and indigenous knowledge brokers and for science diplomacy. Twining arrangements, which involve only one third of biosphere reserves (evaluation of MAP) should be encouraged as they are excellent premises for exchanges and further collaboration.

20. National MAB network of biosphere reserves should be encouraged as appropriate. At local level, governance mechanism is critical to improve representativity and inclusiveness.

21. Membership of MAB national committees should reflect the variety of stakeholders at site level and at national level. Nomination of members should be inclusive of all relevant entities. When membership institution based, there is a risk of high turnover because members change position. Therefore, nominations of members for their personal capacity should be encouraged to mitigate turn-over impact in the memory of the MAB national committee. Representativity (multi-stakeholder) and interdisciplinarity should be enhanced.

22. Networks should be better organized. The regional networks have variable working methods and statutes, which address regional needs and should be flexible in order to be relevant and efficient in the context of their regions. The thematic networks typically should be self-organized and seen as general themes around which projects can be organized. Thematic networks should be inclusive with representatives of all stakeholders relevant to the topic.

23. The wealth of topics dealt within the MAB programme should be reflected by an increased number of interdisciplinary thematic networks in the forthcoming years. There is a need to enlarge the focus of thematic networks in order to provide valuable insights with regards for example to sustainable development models, climate change mitigation and adaptation possibilities, maintenance of ecosystems services, products from
biosphere reserve and marketing or urban-rural interface which have been identified as dominating biosphere reserve related activities by the MAP evaluation.

24. The MAB programme should strengthen its global strategic collaboration with UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN networks which are an asset when designing interdisciplinary activities, especially research, capacity building and training. An interesting model of cooperation is the UNESCO Chair – Biosphere Reserve model7 which is a platform for coordination and dialogue between the scientific community, political leaders, managers of the biosphere reserves, communities which aims to building bridges between the scientific arena and environmental management. This model implemented for instance in Brazil, Costa Rica and Spain could be replicated.

25. Result-based and reporting culture has to be encouraged within the WNBR networks. It is important to assess the performance of networks in order to make corrective actions for improvement. The Exit strategy which request biosphere reserves to submit due decennial periodic reviews by 2017, aims at improving the credibility and the quality of the WNBR. The exit strategy raised awareness of countries in the need of evaluating and improving their management capacity on a regular basis and to report to the MAB-ICC.

26. In support to the clearing house mechanism to be reinforced, networks should be providing information which will be accessible on line. Therefore, a simple online reporting system should be created in MAB website. For instance, biosphere reserves should be encouraged to submit reports on success stories and/or failures and managerial innovation which will allow to share experiences. This reports being on line they could be easily aggregated providing a clearer picture of the WNBR at any time at global level.

27. Regional and thematic networks should design contextualized framework of action in conformity to the Lima action plan with specific targets. This will build a result oriented culture within MAB programme and will ease future evaluations and will foster dynamism within the networks.

28. To enhance participation and dynamism in MAB related networks, there is a need to improve visibility and communication of MAB programme beyond MAB existing community. Youth should be engaged more actively through social media and new information technologies. A global strategic collaboration could be established between MAB and UNESCO associated schools’ networks especially with regards to MAB participation in the Global Action Programme for Education for Sustainable Development8.

7 URL: http://www.unescoetxea.org/dokumentuak/Catedra_reservas_cast.pdf
     http://www.unescoetxea.org/dokumentuak/Catedra_reservas_engl.pdf

8 URL: http://en.unesco.org/gap
29. World Congress of Biosphere Reserve should occur more frequently. They may also be designed as Regional Congress of biosphere reserves which would be attended by more representatives than the usual regional network meetings. Countries are encouraged to take part in the organisation and to host these events which give strong visibility to the MAB programme.